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ABSTRACT

In teaching students to write for an audience, teachers should stress the meaning and purpose of the composition over rhetorical correctness and should emphasize style as well as content. Four teaching approaches through which students may establish and communicate their purposes are (1) "immediate feedback," in which teachers motivate pupils through reading poetry aloud to them, providing provocative phrases for theme topics, and then discussing the students' compositions with them; (2) "talk-write," in which pupils focus on the important aspects of their compositions through pre-writing discussions of purpose, detail, audience, and tone; (3) the use of short comparative sets of assignments which vary according to tone, sequence, and description to fit the audience; and (4) Richard Young's TRI Approach which centers on form: e.g., in a three-sentence paragraph, the first sentence would be a general statement, the second sentence a restriction, and the third sentence an illustration of the topic. (JM)

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1969 NCTE Convention Topic: "Writing as Leading the Reader to a Discovery"

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As English Consultant for the West Lafayette Community Schools, I have the privilege of visiting various classes along the K-12 continuum. Once I was invited to share some of my favorite poetry with a first grade class; and just before I began reading, several pupils in the class asked if I had any spooky poems for them. They wanted to be scared to death. As I madly searched through Reflections on a Gift of Watermelon Pickle for something that would horrify my audience, a little boy next to me raised his hand and softly said,"Sir...sir... could I give the poem I just made up?" I felt a little dubious about this request, since I could imagine what it would be like to have the other twenty-four children wanting to talk-out a scarey invention of theirs with all sorts of grrr's, wooo's, and booo's. So, putting a polite smile on my face, I looked at him and said "That's very good! Keep that poem in mind because soon I'll give you a chance to write it down on paper." With a meek sort of persistence, he came back with "Sir, I can give it to you right now, if you like." The child could not take a hint. So I asked him to tell us the poem he just made up. The boy walked to the chalkboard and said,"First, let me illustrate the setting for my poem." He sketched a three-story house which

supposedly had been abandoned for haunting purposes. The boy then began talking-out a Boris Karloff-type narrative in which he included witches, goblins, skeletons, and a tarrantula spider. When he finished, I told him that his invention didn't sound like a poem at all, but rather like a good play. With his hands in pocket, he turned to the class and said: "Would you like to put on my poem-play?" This was a smart young man I was dealing with. He looked at me this time and repeated his question: "Could we put on my poem-play?" Nodding my head, I signalled an approval for his take-over. This was the type of anarchy I favored. "How many want to be the witches?" he asked. All the girls screamed and raised their hands at the same time. He selected the witches, the goblins, and the skeletons, and directed them to a place on their make-believe stage. I reminded him about the tarantula. After he picked out "spider-boy", he turned to me and said, "Sir, will you please narrate my poem-play?" "I'll try my best," I replied. And I did try my best to remember what the boy had said, but he had to correct me three times. When the whole play, lasting about five minutes, was finished, he came up to me, and in a confidential way whispered, "Did you notice how I got everyone involved?"

This little boy, as a composer, wanted to reach his audience not only through mental involvement but also through physical participation. This experience with the first grade class clearly indicated to me what James Moffett meant when he said "Drama is the perfect place to begin the study of rhetoric," for I realized how drama could sensitize pupils to selecting and ordering.

In drama the pupils can select and order gestures, events, and speech to involve the audience with an experience. In writing the pupil can select and order descriptions which allow the reader to discover a commonality in the world experienced by the reader and the world shared by the writer. Some people look at the audience's involvement as a type of communion which the composer Stravinsky talks about in Poetics for Music, or as a type of sympathetic contract that John Ciardi talks about in How a Poem Means. This is how some people look at audience involvement of two types: music and poetry. But how does the teacher of writing regard the notion of "reader involvement"? So often the devotion to correctness, propriety, and neatness takes precedence over any design for teaching composition. And so often the opposite extreme is propagandized through the golden calves who repeat "Just let the kids write whatever they want to. Don't interfere with their style. They will develop one of their own." As teachers of writing--whether we are teachers in secondary schools or teachers in elementary schools-- shouldn't we be concerned chiefly with helping pupils to compose for the purpose of leading the reader to a discovery? Isn't this the type of craft control that we are after? If the answer to these questions is yes, how as teachers can we guide pupils to discover some method for leading the audience? What specific approaches might be used to establish learning boundaries in which the pupils discover their own motives in writing and ways in which to communicate their motives to an audience?

I wish to share with you four practices which may help

pupils to realize both purpose and audience in writing.

1. The first practice might be called "Immediate Feedback." It's old-fashioned, simple, but quite sensible. The teacher merely parks herself some place in the room and invites pupils to talk with her as soon as they complete a short writing assignment. By praising, by asking questions, and by suggesting cross-outs, the teacher helps each pupil to identify the good parts around which a poem or descriptive narrative can take shape, and in this way gives immediate reinforcement to the pupil's try at writing. It's a type of behavioral conditioning that Robert Zoellner encourages in his January 1969 article in College English. When teaching poetry to four different classes of third grade pupils in the West Lafayette Schools, I used this approach and found the pupils highly motivated as a result of the immediate reinforcement. Before asking them to write, I read several poems, and then briefly discussed rhyme and several forms they could try. On one occasion, I wrote short descriptive phrases such as "Flashing lights," "Giant flowers," "Dark shadows," and "Naked fingers," putting each phrase on a 4x6 card. Then I asked each pupil to draw a card and to use the phrase as the first line of his poem. As the pupils wrote, I sat in the back of the room and told them to show me their poems as soon as they were finished. Each pupil came to the back of the room and we talked briefly about the poem. The pupils

seemed to feel rewarded even when only a phrase of theirs was identified as "well written." And almost everyone was able to write at least one good phrase. The few who could not were encouraged to try other topics or were given special help. Before showing me their final drafts, most pupils had two or three chances to talk about their revisions. The following are several samples of their poetry.

SNIDE

Alone in a snide field on a dark gloomy night,
You have to do an errand and pick a peck of snide.
And spookiest of all, it's almost nine miles wide.
You reach inside a snide bush and what hides?
Why of all things it's a peck of snide!
Then you hear a noise; it sounds like a rat.
Close, but not close enough!
It's a bat!
You run, you scream! Then you think
It's a dream.
It seems to follow you!
More and more!
It's a dreadful horror!
But all of a sudden, you see
That all it was, was a kite
Stuck up in a tree.

-Tommy Pounders

SNOW

The snow was white
on top of the roof.
It seems to sparkle
only when I'm there.

-Tom Armstrong

FOOTPRINTS

Footprints are like little friends
who follow everywhere you go.
Then when I walk around,
the wind starts to blow.

-Leisa Manley

All of the third grade classes working with the poetry unit decided to publish their own booklet of poems. And in one of the classes, we formed five film-producing teams, each of which selected a particular poem to convey its meaning through the medium of film. I found it to be one of the most exciting projects I ever worked with.

2. Another approach which has received much impetus from the Dartmouth Conference is the Talk-Write approach. Before actually trying to write the assignment, pupils and their teacher discuss such things as (a) the specific purposes of the assignment, (b) the kinds of detail that should be included in the writing, (c) an audience to whom the writing can be directed, and (d) the tone of the writing. When the teacher and the class finish the talk-out, the front blackboard is filled with suggestions for writing. In essence, the talk-write approach is, as Ed Jenkinson puts it, "a type of conspiracy between the teacher and the pupils in attacking a writing assignment." The advantages in using this approach are many:

(a) It helps the pupils to observe the many choices

of detail which might be included in the composition.

(b) It forces pupils to order their own feelings about a subject before they actually try to communicate feeling to a reader.

(c) It forces pupils to discriminate between relevant and irrelevant detail.

(d) It allows the teacher and the pupils to discuss important matters about contextual boundaries which help the reader to focus on the subjects of the message. For example, the teacher and the class can determine perceptual reference points regarding time, place, and angle of vision. Furthurmore, the teacher and the class can talk-out the various effects of juxtapositioning phrases which include these reference points.

(e) It allows for revision to be a natural part of the writing process.

I guess what most teachers of writing like most about the talk-write approach is that it allows the pupils to focus on important aspects of selecting, adding, and ordering--

what most people call composition.

3. Another approach, which is an expansion of the talk-write approach, is the practice of using comparative sets of assignments, the variations of which demand conscious adjusting of tone and sequence. Ed Jenkinson's new book, which is currently at the Indiana University Press, is aimed at having pupils in grades 7-12 work with sets of writing assignments, varying in purposes and audiences. Through the talk-out sessions, which are part of the discovery approach prescribed in the use of the materials, pupils adjust sequence, description, and tone to fit the purpose and audience. Jenkinson's notion of working with sets of assignments can easily be adapted for use with pupils in grades 3-6.

To explain more precisely what I mean by working with sets of assignments, I wish to give a brief account of one teaching experience I had with another class of third grade pupils. My objective in teaching writing to this class was to create a learning situation in which the class experimented with controlling both objective and subjective tones in describing similar subjects. I gave two writing assignments back-to-back. The purpose in the first one was to write one paragraph, identifying city landmarks for someone who had never visited West Lafayette. This paragraph could be one part of a letter to a friend. For the most part, the tone of the description was to be objective. After discussing the writing situation

with the class and after spending at least twenty minutes listing prominent landmarks in and around the city, the pupils began their writing. The following is a sample from this assignment:

> If you come to West Lafayette, you will see these landmarks. First, the great Wabash River. It is the biggest river near us. It divides us from Lafayette. Probably the next landmark you'll see is Purdue University. It includes a service center, airport, and arena.
>
> -Kim

The purpose of the second assignment was for the pupils to tell what they like to do best in West Lafayette. The audience was the teacher. The following writing is a sample from this assignment.

> The thing I like best in West Lafayette is the Purdue Airport. I like it when it is night because that's when the blue lights come out and the planes come in. The big planes roar loudly and the little planes don't roar as loud. There is a big light that shines in the night. And it looks beautiful.

Working with a set of assignments over a relatively short period of time gave the class a chance to work intensively with composition.

4. Another approach which centers more on form than on process is Richard Young's TRI Approach in which the writer plots sentences on various levels of generality to carry the reader to a discovery. For example in using the TRI approach in a three sentence paragraph, the writer would have one

sentence giving a general statement on the topic. Another sentence would restrict the topic. The third sentence would illustrate the topic, possibly through an example. In some ways Young's analysis of levels of generality is similar to Francis Christensen's notes on "A Generative Rhetoric of the Sentence." However, Young goes beyond the sentence. In terms of form, Young's TRI method is restrictive; but it invariably produces good results and is simple to teach. In experimenting with a group of third grade pupils to see if they could imitate this approach, I asked the class to write a short three sentence paragraph about the weather. The first sentence was to tell generally what kind of day it was. The second sentence was to include details describing the weather. And the third sentence was to tell the reader how the writer felt as a result of the weather conditions. The following are samples of the class's writing.

> Today is gloomy. The clouds are low and dark. They are very gray. They make me feel like going in my closet and playing trolls.
>
> -Christine

> Today is the kind of day that gives me the blas. The sky is cloudy and it is cold. I'd like to go home and read a book that's better than the books at school.
>
> -Dave

> Today is a dorpy day and I feel dorpy too. The grass is brown and it is no fun to play on. I feel like going and flop in my bed.
>
> -Leigh Ann

> It is a pleasant day. It is a great day to climb a tree and just watch the birds. I feel like running out of the house and forget my coat. And climb the tree.
>
> -Sharon

Although pupils invariably come up with good pieces of writing when they apply Young's approach, I find it necessary to raise these questions: Will the pupils learn to write better by a mere imitation of form? Is the TRI approach a neat pedagogical handle such as the topic sentence or the thesis statement--- the over-emphasis of which has led to a dull, pasturized style of writing? In answer to both questions, I fell that the teacher must look at Young's approach as more than a form to imitate. The TRI method can be a tool in helping even young pupils to realize the effects of ordering sentences in a way that focuses on what the writer really wants to share with the reader. If the teacher uses the TRI method as one approach to help the pupils become conscious of communicating with the reader, and if the teacher reinforces other attempts of the pupil to involve the reader, the pedagogical focus will be on process in writing and not on mere imitation. For example, in a fourth grade class, I can see the teacher reinforcing the TRI notions of leading the reader when working with a topic assignment such as this one: "If I Could Change Anyone's Behavior in the World..." The following written responses from fourth grade pupils indicate such reinforcement.

> If I could change anyone's attitude I would change my friend's attitude. She screams at practically anything I say, and it makes me feel that she doesn't like me anymore. I would like to change her to a nice, quiet, gentle child.
>
> -Jane

> If I could change anyone's behavior I would change the Russians. They teach war and say soon they will have enough power to take over the United States. They are taking free countries and turning them into states. I would like to change their behavior. I would like for them to forget the word war.
>
> -Gwen

To the curriculum designers, the use of Young's TRI approach in the intermediate grades could have some interesting implications---especially if teaching the generation of the paragraph and larger units is considered part of the 7-12 curriculum.

The four practices I have mentioned can be used to make the young writers more concious of the art of composing. Not covered in this paper are other constraints which influence out-put of pupils' writing. For example the very self-concious sixth grade pupil who is constantly being told by his parents and teachers to act more like a young adult may experience constraints that influence what he consciously conveys about himself in writing. On the other hand, a free and uninhibited first grade pupil may experience graphemic and syntactic constraints which the older pupil doesn't experience. However, the ways to approach pupils experiencing these constraints is a topic for another paper.

Conclusion:

The behaviorists, the tagmemicists, the leaders at the Dartmouth Conference, and the advocates of the new rhetoric have clearly given directions for ways to a much-needed overhaul

in the teaching of writing in the elementary schools. It's time for the elementary teachers and the curriculum designers and the text book manufactures to execute the overhaul and to revolutionize what we are doing to kids when we ask them to write. It's time to make writing humane and intellectual pursuit, not a mere drudgery to simplistic features of an out-dated rhetoric.

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